Tourism in Protected Areas: Worsening Prospects for Tigers?

ABHIJIT BANERJEE

Against the backdrop of the increasing popularity of ecotourism and the dramatic loss of tigers due to lack of funding, mismanagement, population and development pressures as well as poaching, this article finds that the present policies benefit neither conservation nor local communities. It is only by integrating ecotourism into a broader array of sustainable livelihoods, will local communities be more inclined to support conservation efforts.

Tourism in India’s wide network of protected areas (PAs) has a long history, but concerns about its nature are relatively recent. In recent decades, while the popularity of “ecotourism” has skyrocketed, the concept remains poorly understood and much abused, particularly in India. Scholars of ecotourism have identified at least four principles that must be satisfied for genuine ecotourism: minimisation of environmental impacts, generation of funds for conservation, benefits to local communities, and education of visitors (Honey 1999). However, even a cursory examination of wildlife tourism in PAs of India demonstrates that few of these conditions are met, with the result that such tourism benefits neither conservation nor local communities.

Concerns about the shortcomings of such poorly planned wildlife tourism have become all the more urgent in the light of the tiger conservation debacle that has been unfolding in India for the past several years, a fact noted by the Tiger Task Force Report of 2005 (Narain et al 2005). While the dramatic loss of tigers in recent years may be attributed to a variety of factors including lack of funding and mismanagement, population and development pressures as well as poaching, it can be argued that well-planned wildlife tourism would not only increase funding, but by benefiting local communities make them more inclined to support conservation efforts. This article examines the context of wildlife tourism in PAs of India, points out its shortcomings, and makes recommendations that are likely to benefit the goals of tiger conservation.

Wildlife Tourism in PAs

PAs in India are managed by the Indian Forest Service (IFS), an elite and professional institution under the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MOEF). In the decades immediately following the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972, the “fortress conservation” model followed by the conservation establishment worked wonders initially in terms of reviving dwindling numbers of tigers and other wildlife, but had the unfortunate outcome of seriously alienating local communities by denying or disrupting their livelihoods, that not only led to perennial conflict with authorities, but also increasing instances of aiding and abetting poaching by locals (Kothari et al 1995; Saberwal et al 2001). To reduce antagonism with local communities, eco-development and participatory management efforts have been started in many states, but have only achieved sporadic successes so far (Kothari and Pathak 2004).

The very nature of the forest service bureaucracy has often worked against the interests of conservation. Although recruitment to the IFS is highly selective, it is open to graduates from a wide range of disciplines, often attracting high educational achievers with little or no interest in conservation in search of a secure government job (Hannam 1999, 2004). With many admirable exceptions, such officers have had little motivation to work creatively and painstakingly for conservation, especially under difficult circumstances, being satisfied with maintaining the status quo. Further complicating the situation is the system of compulsory periodic transfers of IFS officers, a colonial era practice thought to prevent corruption. However, they also create discontinuity and reduce motivation for long-term improvement; progress is frequently stalled when a motivated officer is replaced by one who is far less so.

Shortcomings of Tourism

Of the over 500 PAs in India, by far the most popular are the tiger reserves that face heavy visitor numbers during the tourist season. Since tourism has always been peripheral to the IFS’ mission, tourism in PAs tends to be poorly planned, with the infrastructure and management inadequate or unsuitable for ecotourism in most places. For example, most PAs permitting tourism do not have any kind of visitor-orientation centres and only a handful have any sort of naturalist guide training programme (Kumar 2002). Further, research shows that due to a lack of...
awareness, the vast majority of visitors to Indian PAs are simple pleasure-seekers ignorant about conservation, with attitudes and behaviour incompatible with responsible ecotourism (Mawdsley et al 2009).

Although the IFS administrators have ultimate authority over every aspect of PA management including tourism, they are not formally trained in the principles of ecotourism so that little or no attention is paid to sustainable design, visitor education, impact assessment, or revenue sharing, all important aspects of ecotourism management (Hannam 1999, 2004). One unfortunate outcome of this situation has been that the tourism revenue generated has mostly gone to government coffers or to private tour/lodge operators, while local communities, already at odds with the forest administrators, have received only meagre benefits in the form of menial jobs such as cooks, porters, janitors and jeep drivers (Kumar 2002). This not only perpetuates the perennial funding crunch for PAS, but also antagonises local people who get no benefits from the park.

Tourism policy in Indian PAS has also been contradictory and conflicting. While the Ministry of Tourism (MOT) has heavily promoted PAS with an eye towards maximising tourism revenue, the IFS has traditionally looked at tourism as an irritant. State tourism departments often have government-owned tourist lodges inside or at the periphery of PAS and run them independently of the PA management without regard to whether visitor numbers or amenities provided are compatible with sustainable ecotourism. With little capacity for planning sustainable ecotourism, the main response of PA administrators has been to restrict tourist numbers, activity and infrastructure inside PAS (Kumar 2002).

Although such restrictions have helped, there has been an uncontrolled proliferation of hotels, lodges and eateries outside the PA boundaries where the forest department’s control ends, leading to unchecked pollution, noise and waste disposal problems affecting both the PAS and the adjacent wildlife corridors vital for endangered species (Narain et al 2005). Further, in the popular tiger reserves such as the Kanha, Ranthambhore and Corbett, forest authorities have been unable to resist pressures to allow increased tourism for higher revenue generation. This has translated into waves of tiger sighting frenzy common during the tourist season where tigers are chased and surrounded by jeeps and elephants for photo-ops, with significant impacts on wildlife behaviour and habitat (ibid).

Even among the conservation establishment, there is disagreement about the role of ecotourism in conservation. Some believe that the most sensitive areas be closed to all sorts of human interference including tourism, while others advocate increasing tourism to generate revenues for conservation. The latter group is usually in favour of promoting upmarket ecotourism, targeting “high-value” ecotourists as a means of generating ample funds, while limiting visitor numbers. But high spending tourists are not necessarily the most conservation-minded and indulging them in luxury hotels will do little to generate support for conservation among local communities. Indeed, the past few decades have witnessed a proliferation of luxury resorts near PAS, worsening environmental impacts and further antagonising local communities (ibid).

The MOT does have a Wildlife Tourism Policy document that emphasises small-scale, low impact projects with significant educational components, but it falls short in terms of specific, operational and enforceable guidelines. Besides, although these guidelines discuss the importance of benefit sharing with local communities, they do not advocate community-based ecotourism in place of current models of private entrepreneurship. Finally, this policy has been developed independently from and without coordination with the MOT, so that there is no mechanism to deal with conflicting and contradictory objectives (Rangan 2003).

On a positive note, a few PAS have been able to establish reasonably successful models of responsible ecotourism by capturing more revenue from park fees, integrating community participation, and better educating visitors, with the Periyar National Park being the most notable example. Indeed, many authors have documented former poachers participating enthusiastically in conservation and tourism-related projects in Periyar (Kothari and Pathak 2004; Thampi 2005). However, these successes can usually be attributed to committed efforts by dedicated and innovative individuals and/or non-governmental organisations (NGOs), a fact that has made such successes the exception rather than the norm. Development of a sustainable model of ecotourism in PAS nationwide requires a fundamental reorientation of approach.

**Policy Recommendations**

Instead of the current fragmented and disorganised system, an Ecotourism Committee (ETC) should be established for each PA, much like eco-development committees or joint forest management committees in many places. The ETC should comprise IFS administrators, representatives of local communities and appropriate NGOs and would be responsible for all aspects of tourism in the PA including policy, planning and operations. Tourism departments and private operators, with no expertise or interest in sustainable tourism, should not be allowed to operate inside the park. Ecologically vulnerable zones immediately outside the PA boundaries should be reserved for low-impact community-based ecotourism ventures, to be developed with assistance from appropriate NGOs or government agencies. An immediate ban on new construction or expansion of private hotel and lodge construction must be put in place in these important fringe areas with a goal of eventual relocation. In the meantime, compliance with strict environmental standards should be made mandatory and heavy fines imposed for violations.

Park entrance fees should be earmarked exclusively for PA management, as in most other parts of the world. Such revenues would contribute resources for park management, ecotourism operations, as well as community development projects. In case a complete capture of such fees is not possible, a significant “conservation cess” should be collected. Private hotels and lodges nearby must be made to pay a “conservation tax” since they depend on the publicly-funded PA for their business. In most PAS the entry fee is quite low, not even inflation-adjusted over time (Narain et al 2005), and a slight increase is unlikely to affect the ability of ordinary citizens to visit their national parks. At the same time, calls to make PAS financially self-sufficient by
promoting exclusive, upmarket ecotourism should be vigorously resisted in the interests of sustainability and equity.

Instead, ecotourism research offers other fair and effective ways to reduce visitor numbers. One useful approach for keeping out undesirable tourists is through a deliberate reduction in amenities that conventional tourists take for granted such as electric gadgets, hot showers, air conditioning, multi-regional cuisine, etc. Limiting such amenities through promotion of spartan facilities is a sure way of restricting all but the most passionate and dedicated visitors. An important reason Indian PAs attract the wrong kinds of tourists is because they almost universally offer “passive” activities, where the visitor has to do nothing more than ride a jeep and stare at nature. Minimising such passive activities and promoting more “active” experiences such as interpretive sessions, guided hiking and camping will go a long way towards attracting the right kind of eco-tourist. Further, all visitors should be provided an educational experience through trained naturalist guides and interpretive sessions that not only focus on natural history, but also on threats to conservation. Such an experience will not only be enriching, but is also likely to instil in visitors a lasting conservation ethic. Most importantly, only visitors patronising etc-approved facilities inside or community-based ecotourism ventures outside the PA should be allowed access to the park.

Benefits to local communities should accrue at multiple levels. Increased revenue capture will enable training and employment of local people as naturalist guides, guards and in other positions. Assistance should also be provided to set up and run community-based ecotourism ventures outside the park boundaries that will create a vast network impossible for police and forest guards to match. The etc must develop an ecotourism plan as part of the official PA management plan, with specific details about tourism zoning, restriction of tourism numbers and activity, environmental impact monitoring, revenue, employment and community benefits. Each plan should be approved by the moerr, be updated periodically and be available to the public. Forest administrators and etc members should take the help of external experts in planning and implementation of various aspects of ecotourism such as carrying capacity assessment, low-impact lodge design, renewable energy integration, waste management and pollution prevention, naturalist guide training, and innovative interpretation and orientation strategies. External expertise can be harnessed at nominal cost from universities, research institutes and NGOs such as the Wildlife Institute of India-Dehradun, the Centre for Environmental Education-Ahmedabad and EQUATIONS-Bangalore, among others.

Last but not the least, several aspects of the IFS bureaucracy have outraged their usefulness and need to be restructured to cope with current realities. Over time, the IFS needs to switch to a recruitment system that independently advertises positions with particular qualifications, say wildlife ecology or ecotourism management, and hires accordingly. In the short term, ecotourism planning and management must be integrated into IFS training. Also, abolition of frequent transfers is more likely to create an environment where park managers have the motivation to create and nurture innovative programmes many of which have long gestation periods. Instead of transfers, that have had limited success in preventing corruption, a transparent and democratic decision-making system should be put in place at all levels. Again, in the short term, non-profit foundations such as the Periyar Foundation (Thampi 2005) may be created by bringing together different stakeholders to ensure the continuity of innovative programmes even if particular officers get transferred.

Conclusions

Wildlife tourism, as currently practised in most PAs in India, is detrimental to wild-life such as the tiger, both directly in terms of environmental disturbance and indirectly in terms of engendering hostility of local communities who sometimes end up helping poachers out of desperation. An urgent and radical transformation of ecotourism planning and practice is necessary for Indian PAs if the tide is to be reversed. It is important to recognise that ecotourism by itself, even if well-planned, will not be enough to address the myriad problems facing PAs and thus should not be seen as a panacea. Rather, integrating ecotourism into a broader array of sustainable livelihoods through participatory management approaches is of importance to gain long-term community support for conservation. Such support from local communities will be essential for reversing the tiger conservation debacle.

REFERENCES


